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Congressional Democrats call on education secretary to apologize or quit

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Associated Press

LOS ANGELES - Education Secretary Rod Paige, under fire for saying he favors schools offering "Christian values," said he has no plans to apologize because the remarks represent his personal views and not the way he does his job.

"I don't think I would ask you to apologize or any other person to apologize for their beliefs. I would ask them to apologize, however, if they let those things interfere with their conduct and how they interact with other people," Paige told reporters after speaking at a Town Hall meeting in Los Angeles on Friday.

The Bush administration's top education official recently said he would "prefer to have a child in a school where there's a strong appreciation for values, the kind of values that I think are associated with the Christian communities, so that this child can be brought up in an environment that teaches them to have strong faith."

Paige, who is a Baptist, made the remarks to the Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's news service.

"The reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system," he said. "In a religious environment the value system is set. That's not the case in a public school, where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

The remarks triggered a wave of protest, and Friday, 12 Democratic members of Congress demanded that he either apologize or resign.

"We believe that you owe a sincere and unambiguous apology to the many American families whose faiths and educational choices your remarks have denigrated," the letter said. "If you are unprepared to make clear that this sort of religious bigotry has no place in the Department of Education, then we would urge you to resign."

It was signed by Reps. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y.; John Conyers, D-Mich.; Henry Waxman, D-Calif.; Barney Frank, D-Mass.; Eliot Engel, D-N.Y.; Sander Levin, D-Mich.; Jose Serrano, D-N.Y.; Mike Honda, D-Calif.; Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis.; Gary Ackerman, D-N.Y.; Ted Strickland, D-Ohio, and Joseph Hoeffel, D-Pa.

Thirty national organizations led by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights have asked him to retract the statement.

Paige said Friday he hasn't changed his opinion about the benefits of Christian private schools over public ones.

"I don't think it's impossible to be productive when you have a comprehensive school where there are a lot of different beliefs and values and the focus is not clear ... but it's much more difficult," he said.

He also said he would never try to impose his beliefs on others.

"Recently I was asked a question about my own faith and my response was a very personal one," he said. "I don't think anybody has the right to impose their particular feelings about this on other people and I certainly would not ever do that. We should respect all faiths."

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